

Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Plans in Everyday Life, by C. Lee Harrington & Denise D. Bielby.

By: Rebecca Adams

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Abstract:

Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life. By C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby. Temple University Press, 1995. 225 pp. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95.

Reviewer: REBECCA G. ADAMS, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

For decades, psychologists had a monopoly on the study of fans, whom they found to be abnormal, sometimes prone to violence, and worthy of ridicule. Such portrayals are a bit disconcerting, because almost everyone is a fan of someone or something, whether it be in the realm of film, sports, music, or even social theory. Recently, however, a few researchers have studied fan subcultures from a sociological perspective as normal, everyday phenomena, examining the internal organization of fan communities and the relationship of members with one another.

Keywords: psychology | sociology | book reviews | soap operas | fan communities | soap opera fans | television

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examining the internal organization of fan communities and the relationship of members with one another.

Harrington and Bielby take a slightly different but nonetheless solidly sociological approach. While they do analyze the private world of fans, exploring topics such as how viewers of soap operas integrate being a fan into their everyday lives and personal identities, unlike their predecessors they move beyond these microlevel concerns. The authors focus on how the entertainment industry shapes soap opera fan subculture and, to a lesser extent, how fans shape the products they consume. They effectively normalize fan behavior and claim it as a subject worthy of serious sociological inquiry.

The volume is composed of an introduction and six very readable and accessible chapters, which together make up a coherent and interesting argument. Harrington and Bielby begin by discussing the "femaleness" and open-ended structure of the soap opera genre and how these characteristics affect the activities in which fans engage. They emphasize that producers encourage fan activities because they result in fan loyalty, which is essential to any show's success. After describing the process by which soap fans create pleasure, the authors argue that a key form of the pleasure is rooted in activities and experiences that blur the boundaries between internal and external realities and that the enjoyment fans feel is akin to being in love. They further argue that this type of pleasure is more visible in our technologically advanced society, in which consumers are invited to join the production process.

Soap Fans would make an excellent supplementary text for a variety of sociology courses, obviously including popular culture and media classes but also courses on community or deviance. Except for Timothy Diamond's *Making Gay Gold*, I have not read another monograph that so clearly describes the connection between macrolevel structure and microlevel processes. As the authors observe, soap operas are popular among college students. For this reason, students will probably be motivated to read this book even if they would not necessarily read another. They will also admire Harrington and Bielby, who have the courage and the wisdom to admit they are fans.